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School Choice in an English Village: Living, Loyalty and Leaving

Carl Bagley, Durham University, UK

Sam Hillyard, Durham University, UK

c.a.bagley@durham.ac.uk

Abstract

In late modernity the marketisation of public services has become a global policy phenomenon. In the case of schooling this has resulted in parents discursively positioned as consumers of education making a choice between providers of education. To-date the majority of research on parental choice has focussed on the urban; this paper is concerned with the rural. Using ethnographic data collected through interviews (N=24) and observations in one English village it explores the ways in which parents engage with primary school choice. The research draws on Bourdieu's interrelated concepts of field, habitus and capital to discuss how the dispositions and resources parents had impacted upon the school choices they made. In presenting its findings the paper distinguishes between the long-term residents (*villagers*) and more recent arrivals (*newcomers*) to suggest a differentiated commitment to place and schooling.

Key words: School Choice, Parents, Rural Education, Bourdieu.

Introduction

The current rural research literature stresses the interplay of economic, social, political and cultural forces framing and shaping the rural landscape; a shifting picture complicated by counter-urbanisation and demographic tensions in rural communities. Middle-class urban migrants (often with no connection to the locality) attracted by aesthetic notions of the “‘rural idyll’ within a consumption-based countryside’ (Woods, 2006: 587) have moved to or bought second homes in rural areas. This in-migration may be compounded by an outward migration of younger people from these same local communities, seeking employment elsewhere and leaving elderly relatives behind (Giarchi, 2006; Woods, 2006). The result is a blurring as to what constitutes rural living, rural spaces, rural identity and rural occupations. It marks the existence of a ‘differentiated countryside’ that resists any ready essentialism being ascribed to rural localities (Murdoch et al., 2003).

On the everyday level, far from the rural idyll, many working class rural inhabitants face fundamental challenges including the availability of public transport, affordable housing, good health care and perhaps most notably access to education (Giarchi, 2006). Moreover, as Woods (2006: 587) notes, ‘debates over the provision of rural services revolve not only around their functional properties but also around their symbolic properties, as core components of an idealized notion of the rural community’. Arguably at the heart of this resides the rural school (Bagley and Hillyard, 2010; Forsythe, 1984). As Schafft and Jackson (2010) note:

Historically, rural schools have served important roles as centres of social activity and cultural meaning helping to maintain local traditions and particular identities of rural communities. They are sites of civic interaction and shared intergenerational identity and experience (Elder and Conger, 2000, Lyson, 2002, Peshkin 1978).
(Schafft and Jackson, 2010: 2-3)

Local schooling may thus reinforce identification with a community and friendships formed in the classroom may shape the social networks of a community for decades (Woods, 2005: 587); the rural school situated at the inter-section of a multitude of roles both educational and community-orientated (Woods, 2005). The situation is nevertheless complex as synergies between rural schooling and community generated at the local level can potentially be undermined in a centralised urban-facing educational policy environment, in which all schools (rural and urban) are politically positioned, need to respond and can be judged.

Our research situates and engages with the rural school within this contested, somewhat oblique, and constantly moving cultural, social, economic and political landscape.

In this paper, we apply and provide an ethnographic reading and understanding of the lived experiences of individuals in rural spaces in relation to primary school choice. We seek to discover and uncover in one English village what school choice means for the relationship between a local rural school and the community it serves.

A major thrust of education reforms in England since the late 1980s and early 1990s has been to introduce a more competitive, market-like environment into education (DES 1988; DfE, 1993). The reforms were based on the idea that allowing parents to choose their school (instead of attending their local school by default) would increase educational standards; schools would improve their performance when they were forced to compete to attract pupils. Previous research undertaken into the reasons why parents chose a particular school identified a range of factors including academic record, school standards, child's happiness, proximity of school to home and the profile of pupils already attending the school (Greaves, & Vignoles, 2009; Denessen et al. 2005; Hamilton & Guin, 2005; Saporito & Lareau, 1999; Schneider & Buckley, 2002; Taylor, 2002; Witte, 2000; Woods et al., 1998). The literature also suggested that the reasons for a specific choice being made can be informed by the religious, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds of parents (Ball et al, 1995, 1996; Burgess et al, 2009; Denessen et al., 2005; Hastings, Kane, & Staiger, 2005; Vincent, & Ball, 2006; Woods, 1996) and that parents differ – especially according to their socio-economic background – in the ways in which they both understand the working of the education market and subsequently engage with it (Ball et al. 1996; Ball and Vincent, 1998; Raveaud and van Zanten, 2007; Vincent, et al. 2010; Wilkins 2010).

In essence, market engagement and the exercising of school choice is often a difficult task requiring resources and knowledge, which are not necessarily distributed equally between families. For example, Gewirtz et al (1995) distinguish between disconnected choosers, who are working-class parents; semiskilled choosers, who are from a variety of class backgrounds; and privileged or skilled choosers, who are mainly professional and middle class. Similarly, Kelly (2010: 320) suggests that the 'issue for those from poorer backgrounds is that they rarely exercise choice in an optimal way.' In contrast, Ball (2003) signals the sophisticated ways in which middle class parents make school choices based not simply on the present but also their future aspirations for their children. He states:

Middle-class ontologies are founded upon incompleteness; they are about becoming, about the developmental self, about making something for yourself, realizing yourself, realizing your potential. These parents envisage certain sorts of futures for

their children. They see themselves as having the responsibility to make these futures possible through their actions and planning in the here and now.

(Ball, 2003: 163)

Significantly, such ‘planning’ includes the grouping of decisions not simply around schooling but also geo-spatial decisions concerning place in terms of housing, which in relation to access to schooling and school catchment can have a direct impact on obtaining the school of choice (Butler, 1997). Consequently, it is the middle-classes who tend to possess spatial mobility (Massey, 1995) and arguably less of a commitment to a sense of place (Walker and Clarke, 2010). Or a sense of place reformulated and refocused on the type of educational institution in a geographical locale making a significant impact on not only how people – in particular the middle-classes - choose to live but where (Forsey, 2014).

Notwithstanding, the importance of understanding the ways in which social class may impact upon the process of school choice, it is important in understanding the complexity of school choice to move away from overly rigid or reductionist class distinctions and to consider a more ‘nuanced approach...to take account of the fractions within classes’ (Walker and Clarke 2010: 242). For example, Wilkins (2010) argues against the criticism that working-class parents who choose local schools are passive and indiscriminate in making decisions for their children’s education. On the contrary, he contends choosing a nearby school can be an active decision for working-class parents because of the values they attribute to the local community including ‘solidarity, association, shared experience, familiarity, closeness, security, co-operation and connection’ (Wilkins, 2010: 6-7). Similarly, middle-class parents may choose a neighbourhood school for civic goodness or for other principles they value. For instance, Raveaud and van Zanten (2007) revealed that a small number of middle-class parents with a liberal political orientation in London and Paris sent their children to ethnically mixed local schools due to their desire for equality and integration at the societal level. Further, Vincent (2001) differentiates between the choices made by middle class parents holding supervisory and managerial posts in the private sector, from those who work in the public sector in areas such as Education. The latter group using their ‘insider’ knowledge to their child’s educational benefit.

Significantly, the previous body of research on school choice has tended to focus on urban locations rather than rural and on the secondary sector of education rather than primary. One notable exception is the work of Walker and Clarke (2010) which considers the complexities of primary school choice in a rural setting. Walker and Clarke (2010) suggested that for some parents increased choice was perceived as damaging to their rural community in

breaking the connection between the village and its local school; enabling parents to send their children to schools elsewhere. Their research indicated that more recent residents in the village 'were more likely to shop around than the local parents who had a stronger allegiance to support their local school' (Walker and Clarke, 2010: 247). Walker and Clarke (2010), in line with the previous work by Ball (2003), found this decision to be informed by parents considering the longer term advantage of life chances derived from education and not viewing primary school choice as an end in itself, which was the case with some more long-standing local parents (Walker and Clarke, 2010). For the recent village arrivals school choice was based more on reproducing what they perceived as the future social advantage for their children in choosing a certain school regardless of location.

Our research like Walker and Clarke (2010) draws on Bourdieu's concepts of *field*, *habitus* and *capital* to discuss how the dispositions and resources of parents impacted upon the school choices they made. We are taking *field* in this sense to be those social and institutional arenas constituted by networks, structures or relations at micro and macro level, which 'produce and authorise certain discourses and activities' (Webb, 2002: 21-22). Bourdieu (1996) perceives the boundaries around the field of education to becoming increasingly breached especially by the field of the economy as discourses around marketization and managerialism come to dominate (Addison, 2009). School choice and the positioning of parents as consumers of education situated at the heart of such changes in the field. Field and habitus are interrelated, as Bourdieu (1992) observes:

On one side, it is a relation of conditioning: the field structures the habitus.....On the other side, it is a relation of knowledge or cognitive construction: habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and with value, in which it is worth investing one's energy

Bourdieu (1992: 44)

The concept of habitus is used by Bourdieu (1977) to methodologically engage and address the dualisms of agency-structure; the concept used to signify that 'not only is the body in the social world but... the social world is in the body (Bourdieu, 1977) (Reay, 2004: 432). Further, while in terms of habitus an individual is equipped with agency, individuals are likely to lean towards or be (pre)disposed to particular ways of behaving, inextricably bound up with cultural/structural changes (Reay, 2004). As Bourdieu (2000) states:

I developed the concept of 'habitus' to incorporate the objective structures of society and the subjective role of agents within it. The habitus is a set of dispositions, reflexes and forms of behaviour people acquire through acting in society. It reflects the

different positions people have in society, for example, whether they are brought up in a middle-class environment or in a working-class suburb. It is part of how society produces itself.

(Bourdieu 2000: 19)

In this sense Habitus, as Reay (1996: 581) points out, influences the relationship individuals have with 'localised issues of history and geography'. The habitus creates a 'sense of one's place', an understanding and awareness of those things individuals consider as being something for or not for them (Swartz, 1997: 106), excluding the individual from engaging in certain practices particularly those 'unfamiliar to the cultural groupings to which the individual belongs' (Reay, 2004: 433). Habitus thus has a major influence on the ways in which individuals respond to situations and on their understanding and practices temporally shaped and reshaped by the impact of various fields. As Lingard et al (2000: 36) observe, 'Habitus is the sedimentation of history, structure and culture in individual dispositions to practice'.

Capital is a key resource informing habitus, with particular and discernible types defining positions and possibilities of the various actors in any field. Bourdieu (1986), identifies the four types of capital one brings to practice as economic capital (wealth or money), cultural capital (the ability to navigate the systems of knowledge deemed valid by a society), social capital (networks of relations), and symbolic capital (marks of prestige and honour). For Bourdieu, the class-based nature of a society is taken as given and he defines class as 'sets of agents who occupy similar positions and who, being placed in similar conditions...have every likelihood of having similar dispositions and interests and therefore of producing similar practices and adopting similar stances' (Bourdieu quoted in Wilkes, 1990: 114). Capital is concerned with an individual's position within that inequitable social structure; the dominant class defining who possesses the most property and wealth, what counts as legitimate knowledge, what social relations are valuable, and what symbols confer prestige and social honour. As Walker and Clarke (2010) state:

Capital enables people to take up a position, which then interacts with their habitus within the field of social practice; so that for example in the field of education, parents possess various forms of capital, and this interacts with their habitus (or disposition) resulting in school preference for a school with particular characteristics
(Walker and Clarke, 2010: 242)

In applying these conceptual tools it is important to note that they are relational ([habitus] (capital)] + field = practice (Bourdieu, 1984: 101). Consequently, as parents

engage in social practices within a given field so they draw on two interconnected resources one associated with their habitus and the other forms of capital (Waits, 2012).

The Ethnographic Study

The research was conducted through intensive ethnographic fieldwork in an English village over a two year period. The names of the schools, participants and places discussed in this paper are pseudonyms. The overall ethnographic study involved participant observation (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002) inside the village and the schools and semi-structured interviews, field interviews and informal conversations with residents in a host of settings including social clubs, public houses, community centres, shops, sports centres and homes, with data recorded in research diaries (Burgess, 1981). Strong use was also made of documentary material including school inspection reports, ordnance survey maps, residents' websites, parish newsletters and social history records and accounts relating to the village. A photographic archive of the village was also collated from numerous sources including local history publications. An inductive approach was adopted with no theory or hypotheses posited at the outset, with data analysed thematically through the generation of initial codes, identification of specific themes, thematic review and report production (Braun and Clarke (2006).

This paper considers the primary school choice made by parents living in the village. These parents include those who were born in the village and whose association with the locale go back over at least one generation, but in most cases several. We refer to this group as the *villagers*. The *villagers* constitute approximately 90% of the village's total population. The other group of parents have no previous familial ties to the locale and have moved to the village between one to five years ago and reside on a new build private housing estate on the village's periphery. We refer to this group as the *newcomers*. For the purposes of this paper specific school choice-focussed interviews were conducted with *villagers* (N=12) who had chosen the village school and *newcomers* (N=12) who had chosen another primary outside of the village. (This distinction is important as the village school roll showed no *newcomer* parents to have chosen the village school; the school population constituted wholly by the children of *villagers*). An analysis of the occupational profile of the interviewees revealed the *villagers* to be in working class households and the *newcomers* to be in middle class households. All the interviewees were white mothers. All the interviews were conducted post-choice with parents who had children enrolled in their first year at primary school.

Minbury Village

Minbury village was located in the North East of England, the arrival of coal mining and associated railways in the 1840s turning what was originally a small farming village into a growing overwhelmingly working class coal mining settlement. From 1801 to 1891, the population of Minbury grew from 252 to 2,958 (similar to the current population of around 2,500). There were originally three coal mines in or very near the village, one closed in 1919, one in 1935 and the last in 1965. From the 1960-80s the major occupation of male residents remained mining with men travelling to other pits to work, but as more mines closed then the opportunities decreased. The process was a gradual one and the fact that the last colliery directly associated with the village had closed in 1965, meant that the expectations of young people growing up in the village, especially by the 1980s, was that they would no longer follow their fathers or grandfathers down the pit. Villagers subsequently found jobs in the service sector or were unemployed; a number of residents reporting they had left the village to find work but had ultimately returned.

At the time of the study Minbury had also become a dormitory for city commuters with access to a major road and rail network. To meet the needs of these commuters a new private housing estate had been built in 2007 at the south end of the village for approximately 250 *newcomer* residents. The village contained at its centre a community centre used by a number of different local groups, associations and clubs including: a pensioners drop in, knitting circle, history association, local residents association, dominoes club, St John Ambulance, and the village parish council. The village also contained a working men's club, two public houses, a news agent, bakers, pharmacy, hairdressers, a convenience store, fish and chip shop and post office. From the central hub, about a quarter of a mile from the centre, in the direction of the new estate, there was a sports centre and the parish church.

Minbury's village school was opened in 1804 by a local landholder and rebuilt by another, in 1848. It stood in the West of the village and was later used as a Sunday school after a new school was erected in 1913, near the village centre. In the late 1960s a secondary school was built in the North East of the village, to which pupils from the primary transferred. Due to falling school rolls, a decision was taken in the 1970s to demolish the old primary school, and to make what had been the secondary school, the new primary school. It was this primary school which was the current school in the village. The school was approximately a 5-10 minute walk from the central crossroads hub of the village. The school had a student age range of 4-11 with around 164 pupils, 8 teaching staff and 2 teaching

assistants. All staff and students were white, and 15% of the students had some form of learning difficulty. One teacher and both assistants lived in the village. One of the teaching assistants had attended the school as a student and her children now attended the school. The school was undersubscribed in terms of numbers and performed moderately well in terms of the students' academic performance and was graded satisfactory by the national school inspection body Ofsted. Significantly, as noted no *newcomer* children attended the village school, their children either attended a high academic performing private primary school in a city approximately eight miles away, or a state primary school in a neighbouring village approximately two miles away, which had a stronger record of academic achievement than Minbury village school and was graded good by Ofsted.

The Ethnographic Findings

From the fieldwork and interviews in Minbury with both *villagers* and *newcomers* it was possible to identify a number of key emergent themes from the data, to enable a deeper understanding of the school choice process and its potential implications in this particular rural setting. In terms of the *villagers* the key reasons for their primary school choice were loyalty to the local school, and friendship and generational connections. For the *newcomers*, none of whom chose the local village school, two central reasons consistently emerged, academic reputation and pupil profile. In exploring these findings in greater depth we turn first to the *villagers'* school choice before moving on to consider the views of the *newcomers*.

Villagers' School Choice

The most frequently cited reason by the *villagers* for choosing to send their children to the village school was because it was the village school and should therefore be supported. Moreover, it was not simply seen as the village school but more importantly their village school, and therefore inextricably tied to their sense of place and the importance of the school to the village. Two *villagers* expressed this sentiment in the following terms:

It never entered our heads to even think of sending Sam to another school. We have the village school why would we look anywhere else. I mean it is part of the village and it's our school

You've got to support your local school, haven't you? Josh was always going to go there. I know of villages down the road where the primary school has been closed because of numbers and I wouldn't want that to happen here, we need to have the school for the sake of the village. I love this village and it needs its school.

In marked contrast with *newcomer* choice, discussed later below, for the *villagers* the existence of school choice, and the possibility that they could have chosen or expressed a preference for another school, was inconceivable. Their child was always going to attend the local village school. Interestingly, while they did not intend to avail themselves of the opportunity of expressing a preference or choice other than for the local school, that decision was in itself found in part to be informed by an appreciation and understanding amongst *villagers* of the potential implications of choice and the market system in education. Namely, that in not choosing the village school, in a competitive market environment, risked school closure. As a *villager* observed:

I have lived here all my life as has the rest of my family, we all went to the local school just as Carrie my daughter is doing, and we don't want to lose that. I know the school isn't full and what I don't want to happen is that the council decides to close it because of the numbers, what the village would be like without a school, I don't want to think about.

In line with the findings of Walker and Clarke (2012) what the above quotes suggest is the way in which loyalty to the local school is underpinned by an emotional attachment both to the village and the school's place within it. For the *villagers* the primary school is socially and culturally positioned as an integral part of a tight knit community; the working-class *villagers* valuing localism (Gerwitz et al 1995) related to their sense of identity and belonging in terms place. The habitus, loyalty and emotional attachment felt by the *villagers* in part generated by the fact that they had a deep historical connection with the school both in terms of family and friends who had previously attended the school. As the following comments of two *villagers* signify:

Me and Bob met at the primary school. Used to walk there together as young kids and I can still remember us playing football on the school field together and we are still hanging around together. But that is how it is in this village, people are close, they grow up together and still live around here. My kids are going to the village school now and so are his.

I've known Mick since I was six; we went to school together, played football together, just known him all my life really. But that's what it's like round here, you go to school together, you grow up together, my mam knows his mam, they went to school together, his gran knew my gran, our granddads went down the pit together... you're just from the village. The pits closed years ago but the school's still here and

that is where we first got together.....and now our kids are at the same school, but as I said that is how it is around here.....

Interestingly, while the *villagers* for the reasons stated above did not wish to consider choosing another school, and therefore did not engage in a selection process like their *newcomer* counterparts, they did discuss their choice with friends and neighbours. In many ways this acted as a cultural and social (re)affirmation of their continued commitment to the school and village. As the following *villager* commented:

I know it might seem weird but even though I knew which school he was going to and what school my friends were sending their kids to we would still talk to each other when we met at the shops or in the club about choosing the village school. I mean it is a big thing them starting school but also we were kind of like acknowledging how important the school was to us and the village and that it was good it was still there.

Village school choice and attendance represented a desired shared experience which on an interpersonal level had helped to establish and solidify relationships, social networks and a sense of community over time; endowing the village school with a symbolic significance for the *villagers* (Bell & Sigsworth, 1992). The village school provided a reference and meeting point in and through time which invoked memories and emotional attachments and for this reason its choice by *villagers* related to their collective history and culture and was extremely important and socially embedded with their sense of place.

Newcomers' School Choice

In contrast to the *villagers* the middle-class *newcomer* families living on the new estate were either sending their children to private schools or to state schools outside of the village and expressed no real sense of needing to support the village school. Rather, than perceive school choice as a mechanism to sustain the local school for the collective benefit of the community and the village, *newcomers* viewed the opportunity of choice in a much more individualised way. As the following quotes testify:

If I have a choice, then I am going to look around. Just because I have bought a house in the village, doesn't mean I will send my son to the village school. If the one in the next village gets better results then I will be sending him there, which is exactly what we did.....If I am being perfectly honest it is not only the school we don't use the local shops either when we have a large Tesco's just a few miles up the road

We were not going to simply send her to the local school because it is the nearest or local, we wanted one which would suit her as a bright child and give her a good education, help her to perform well. It's really important to get the best start in life.

I think it is nice that we have the local school for people who want to use it but it is not for me and my husband. We knew we had a choice and wanted to use it. I suppose if we didn't have transport then it might have been more difficult. So we are lucky I guess. But we have worked hard and one of the rewards is being able to make choices and I wanted her to go to a school where she would do well academically

In all of the interviews *newcomer* parents related their choice either directly to a desire for their child to attend a school achieving better academic results or indirectly to the perceived intellectual brightness of their own child and the need therefore to send them to a school where those attributes could be nurtured and encouraged. As the following *newcomer* parent commented:

She's a bright kid and we wanted to send her somewhere with a strong academic focus where she could grow and do well...well academically. That was our priority and because we didn't feel the local village school could do that as well as some of the others we had looked into and visited, then we couldn't send her there. I do feel it is important to support your local school but not at the expense of your daughters education. We didn't want to take a chance with the local school their results were just not good enough

As the above quote reveals loyalty to place and acknowledgement of the importance to support the local school is readily superseded when individual educational needs are seen as not been able to be met. Hastings et al. (2005) found that parents' preferences for strong academic results increased in line with family income and with students' own academic abilities; however, family income and academic abilities were found to display a negatively correlated relationship with parents' preference for proximity. In other words, parents who had a higher income and whose children demonstrated higher academic ability rejected their neighbourhood schools in favour of schools with stronger academic performances.

Newcomers’ when asked why they prioritised academic performance over other criteria commented not simply on wanting something which would align with the perceived ability of their child but also something that would ‘get them off’ to the best start academically; academic performance seen as important, not simply in securing a good secondary school and university, but ultimately a good job and a good income. A view encapsulated by the following comment:

We were looking for a primary school with a good academic reputation, one doing well with its exams, I know she is only 5 but we are thinking of her next school and hopefully a good university, you need to plan ahead, I mean education is important and at the end of the day you want your child to do well and have a good life which means a good job and the decisions we take now can affect her whole life, so yes we thought very carefully about her school

In effect, in line with earlier work by Ball (2003) and Walker and Clarke (2010), *newcomer* parents in terms of habitus and capital focussed not simply on the immediate academic qualities and benefits of a particular primary school but the future social advantage which might accrue to their child from attending such a school.

The other factor which featured strongly and repeatedly in interviews was the desire for their child to attend a school with other children ‘like’ her or him. As the following *newcomer* parents remarked:

We also wanted a school that would suit her....where we thought she would fit in and feel comfortable, you know nice kids, well behaved.....from the same kind of background as her

If I am being frank we didn’t want a school with rough kids in...there are some really rundown estates around here with kids who are feral and we didn’t want her going to a school where she would mix with kids like that

In terms of habitus and capital, unlike the *villagers* the *newcomers* on the whole did not know either the other children or their parents in the primary school prior to its choice. Rather, on visiting a school prior to making a choice, they reported observing the other

children at the school in terms of their behaviour, language and appearance. As one *newcomer* parent said:

That is why it is important to visit these schools. I mean the internet is great but it can only get you so far, you need to see the schools for yourself, talk to the head teacher. We wanted to see the teachers and especially the other children at the school you can tell a lot about a school by the types of kids already there and the types of types of families they are from, how they have been brought up...do the children look neat and clean, are polite you know that kind of thing

The desire of the *newcomers* to scan the primary school market, to identify a school beyond the local village school, necessitated a completely different engagement with the school choice process to that of the *villagers* content with and supportive of their local school. The newcomers' approach is encapsulated by the following *newcomer* parent:

We knew within reason that getting him to a good school in terms of transport and time wouldn't be an issue so we looked to see which schools in the area were performing the best both in terms of academic results but also in terms of Ofsted grades. We also spoke to a couple of neighbours and friends who already had children going to school and then we made a kind of short-list and visited those schools and spoke to the head teachers and also to see the children in the school and then we sat down and decided.

Choice for the newcomers can be seen as a process drawing on all forms of capital; the economic capital to know that the cost of travelling to a school outside of the village was feasible in terms of time and money and the cultural and social capital to identify through reading, discussions (with friends, neighbours and head teachers) and school-based observations, the school which to select.

Concluding comments

The research findings align strongly with those of Walker and Clarke (2010) to reveal the nuanced ways in which parents engaged with the choice of primary school in a rural setting. In our case a significant finding was the ways in which primary school choice could be differentiated between long standing *villagers* choosing the local school and recent arrival *newcomers* choosing to send their children to schools outside of the village. For the

newcomers this necessitated having the available time and transport and the economic capital to support the financial implications of the additional travel to get their child to a more distant school. The ability to draw on economic capital to support their school choice in this way, particularly in a rural setting where public transport links were limited, meant that access to this form of capital made choice of school more available to some parents than others (Walker and Clarke, 2010) notably the wealthier the middle-class *newcomers*.

Previous research has indicated the economic and spatial power of the middle-classes to buy a house near to a popular/oversubscribed school in order to increase their chances of getting their child in (Butler, 1997). In our study the *newcomers* interviewed were aware that the village had a primary school but all of them said that this was not the reason for moving to the village; a decision which related to the affordability of property and convenience in being able to commute to work. On the contrary, all of them said they had no intention of choosing the village school, but would choose either a private fee paying school in a nearby city or ‘better performing’ state school in a neighbouring village.

Significantly, whereas previous work by Vincent et al (2004) and Ball and Vincent (2005) made a connection between life-style, school choice and locality, our research in support of the findings of Walker and Clarke (2010), suggests for those moving into rural locales the position is more complex, ‘rural lifestyle for the newcomer parents is not enough and not place specific. It has to be the ‘right’ rural school.’ As McDowell et al.’s (2006: 217) research into urban middle-class choice of childcare observes ‘the significance of place for the middle class may be in decline’. The spatial mobility of the middle-class *newcomer* parents in our rural locale meaning they could buy a house in one place and choose to school in another. As Forsey (2014) observes:

The seeming imperative to disembed social relations from places and locales characterizing mobile modernity impels people to leave habitual spaces in order to better themselves (Giddens 1990; Corbett 2009). Middle-class people in particular are trained to view mobility as a key signifier of progress.

(Forsey, 2014: 7)

In finding the ‘right’ school the *newcomers* not only brought their economic capital into the school choice process (in terms of meeting travel costs or private school fees) but also their cultural and social capital, in scanning the market to find an appropriate other-than-village school, involving the reading of school prospectuses, Ofsted reports, school visits, meetings with head teachers and discussions with neighbours and friends. The deployment of forms of capital by the middle-class *newcomers* tended to be informed by an individualised

focus on the future, and the opportunities attending a particular primary might afford in terms of getting in to a particular high performing secondary school and by implication increase their child's future life chances. In essence reproducing social advantage were more important to the *newcomers* than community loyalty (Walker and Clarke. 2010)

Interestingly, the *villagers* in selecting the village school where in a different way also focussed on the future. For the *villagers* choosing the village school related in part to the sustainability of the village; the school perceived as a central and integral part of the community, and one which needed to be protected and supported. In line with Walker and Clarke (2010: 247) there was an 'emotional commitment to the rural community which involved supporting the local school' and its future. Moreover, the *villagers* possessed awareness and understanding of education policy and market forces and the need to exercise choice in a way which safeguarded the school and by implication their village and its community. They understood that lack of support in the form of choice, could result in low school student numbers making the school potentially unviable and ultimately result in school closure. Consequently, for both the future of the school and village their choice was perceived by the *villagers* as important.

Previous research has suggested working class parents may be constrained by geography, limited family budgets and support with managing work schedules and child care, tend to choose the local school because it is the cheapest and most convenient option in terms of access (Kelly, 2009; Waslander et al 2010). As a result it is suggested a kind of 'resigned acceptance' of simply choosing the nearest school can set in (Burgess et al. 2009: 11). Our study found that for all the *villagers* interviewed it was not the case that there were other schools to which they would have liked to apply had their material circumstances been different or their possession of various forms of capital greater. All the *villagers* interviewed considered themselves to be making a 'real' choice; having a commitment and a long standing connection to the village and a belief in the significant role the local school played in sustaining their community. In terms of habitus village school choice was a historically and culturally informed disposition orientated towards collective village life, as opposed to more individualised, mobile orientations of the newcomer middle classes.

On this point it is worth restating the findings of Gerwitz et al. (1995) in relation to the value working-class parents may place on localism; in this case a value potentially heightened when the local is not simply a geographical area within a larger urban setting, but is constituted by the entire rural setting itself. A setting in which the choices one makes can still be perceived as making a difference.

The highly stable, long standing *villager* population meant that even those who didn't currently have a direct association with the school had themselves very likely attended it. Moreover, relations established at the school were not only consolidated in the community through proximity of living and socializing (30 years ago they would more than likely have worked as coalminers together) but return to the school when those former pupils themselves become parents (and grandparents) of children at the school. In terms of habitus there existed a strong temporal bond between the village and the school, restated and reinforced through consistent patterns of *villager* school choice. Moser (2004) contended that the extent to which a school becomes and feels an integral part of community is in part determined by the proportion of local students that choose to attend their local school, the more local students the stronger the bond between school and community.

In Minbury a sense of identity as being 'from the village' was exceptionally strong amongst the *villagers* and used descriptively to position the 'other' as 'from' or 'not from' the village. Individuals who fell into the 'not from the village' category included both those who lived outside the village, or the *newcomers* living in the village but with no family association to it. In the main a social setting existed in Minbury in which to a very large extent (apart from the *newcomers*) everyone broadly knew everyone else. In line with Bell and Sigsworth (1992: 65) individuals did 'not merely reside within their particular locality, but ... they belong to it'. The village locale and personal, familial, and group association with it, providing a sense of shared identity, a common sense of place and a mutual sense of pride and obligation.

In this context the difference in allegiance to the village school between *villager* and *newcomer* as manifested through the school choice process was potentially a highly divisive one (Walker and Clarke, 2010). Walker and Clarke (2010) make the important observation that whereas in urban areas with a large number of schools to potentially choose from and a high population density, which school is being chosen by which parents is less visible. In rural areas with relatively few schools and a much smaller population, so school choice patterns become much more visible and high profile. In essence, the *villagers* can see that no *newcomers* have chosen their school and therefore by implications do not necessarily share their commitment to the school, the role it serves within the local community, or to the village itself; a perspective borne out in the interviews with *newcomers* who in explaining their reasons for school choice expressed very little sense of localism, being more concerned with finding the right school regardless of locale. Consequently, the school choice process

had the potential to further reinforce and reproduce the prevailing ‘from’ and ‘not from’ the village distinctions being made by the *villagers* concerning the *newcomers*.

Our findings suggest the working-class *villagers* and the middle-class *newcomers*, whilst occupying a similar geographical rural space within the village, in terms of lifestyle choices reveal a markedly different commitment to place and a different sense of space. For the rural middle-class *newcomers*, as has been shown with their urban counterparts (McDowell et al., 2006), lifestyle choices (including school choice) were not necessarily place specific. The overriding desire is an individualised one in which capital is utilised to reproduce perceived social advantage for themselves and their family. The working-class *villagers* in contrast with a long standing intergenerational connection with the village were found to hold a much stronger sense of place in which habitus and forms of capital are deployed in relation to school choice as a mechanism to sustain their village identity and community.

Overall the findings reveal the ways in which the process of school choice functions in the *field* of education in relation to working and middle class *habitus* and *capital* to intercede with different perceptions and styles of rural living and sense of place in an increasingly differentiated countryside.

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